



## WOMEN AND ALTERED SOCIAL STRUCTURATION: FACTS AND FICTION IN AMITAV GHOSH'S IBIS TRILOGY

Ms. Ingale Snehalata<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Vaishali S. Pradhan<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Research Student, Milind College of Arts, Chh. Sambhaji Nagar, Maharashtra

<sup>2</sup> Principal, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Chh. Sambhaji Nagar

### ABSTRACT

This article explores the representation of women in Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy*, focusing on the lives and struggles of female characters during the colonial period in the nineteenth century. The paper examines how Ghosh's novels—*Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015)—depict women within the socio-political and cultural structures shaped by British colonialism, particularly in relation to the Opium War. While the narratives draw on historical events, they also highlight the ways in which women defy patriarchal limitations, embodying both personal resistance and a broader feminist consciousness.

**KEYWORDS:** Social Structuration, Colonialism, Opium Trade, Gender Roles, Women's Resistance, Feminist Consciousness

### INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh is one of the foremost Indian English writers, known for his masterful narrative style and the blending of historical events with fictional storytelling. His work, particularly the *Ibis Trilogy*, stands out for its depiction of the intersection between colonialism, history, and gender. Ghosh's exploration of social and political issues is rooted in the opium trade that defined much of the colonial enterprise between China and Britain during the nineteenth century. Through his compelling female characters, Ghosh critiques the social structuration of the time, shedding light on the oppressive structures that governed women's lives. His works, which include *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, and *Flood of Fire*, are not only historically grounded but also provide a vivid portrait of female resilience within a patriarchal society.

The concept of social structuration, as articulated by British sociologist Anthony Giddens, serves as the theoretical framework for this analysis. Giddens' Theory of Structuration emphasizes the dynamic relationship between individual actions and the overarching societal structures that shape them. In the context of colonial India, women's lives were tightly bound by social conventions, yet the characters in Ghosh's trilogy reflect a continuous struggle to transcend these norms.

#### Social Structuration and Women in Colonial India:

Social structuration refers to the interplay between individual actions and the external structures of society that govern those actions. In the case of colonial India, these structures were heavily influenced by the British colonial presence, but also by indigenous social hierarchies, including caste, class, and gender. In this setting, women were often relegated to secondary roles, their identities determined by the social norms and patriarchal systems that controlled every aspect of their lives.

In traditional Indian society, women's roles were pre-determined and largely confined to the domestic sphere. Their

lives were governed by their relationships to male figures: first their fathers, then their husbands, and eventually their sons. The *Ibis Trilogy* presents women who, though initially bound by these constraints, begin to redefine their identities and challenge these patriarchal expectations.

#### Women in the Ibis Trilogy:

Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* provides a rich tapestry of female characters who navigate the complex socio-economic and political landscapes of nineteenth-century colonial India. The trilogy's portrayal of women transcends the stereotypical roles often assigned to them in historical fiction, offering a more nuanced and dynamic view of their lives.

#### Deeti: Struggling for Identity:

Deeti, the protagonist of *Sea of Poppies*, embodies the harsh realities faced by women in colonial India. Married to an opium-addicted ex-soldier, Deeti suffers abuse at the hands of her brother-in-law and is initially forced into a life of suffering. However, she manages to escape an enforced death ritual (Sati) with the help of Kalua, a lower-caste man, and embarks on a journey toward self-empowerment. Deeti's struggle for survival is emblematic of the larger feminist movement during this period, wherein women sought to redefine their existence in a world shaped by colonial oppression and patriarchal control.

In her quest for autonomy, Deeti assumes the identity of "Aditi," a name symbolizing her transformation and resistance to the role imposed upon her by society. Her journey reflects the search for a new identity—a key theme in Ghosh's work. As she seeks freedom and dignity, Deeti's character challenges the traditional notions of womanhood, breaking away from the image of the self-sacrificial, obedient wife and mother.

#### Paulette: Challenging Colonial Boundaries:

Paulette, a French orphan raised in India, is another significant character in *Sea of Poppies*. Although born to European

parents, Paulette's upbringing in India gives her a unique position within the colonial social order. After fleeing from her guardian's sexual abuse, she boards the Ibis ship disguised as an Indian woman, assuming the name Putleshwari. Paulette's story highlights the complex intersections of race, gender, and colonial identity, as she navigates the challenges of being a European woman in India, struggling to find a place for herself in a society that marginalizes her.

#### Shireenbai: Rewriting the Script of Widowhood:

In *River of Smoke*, Shireenbai represents the growing agency of women within the colonial system. As a widow, she faces the challenges of reclaiming her husband's wealth and status, particularly after discovering his secret relationship with a Chinese woman, Chi-Mei. Shireenbai's efforts to take control of her own destiny—defying traditional norms of widowhood—reflect a broader narrative of female empowerment within the context of colonial exploitation.

#### CONCLUSION

The *Ibis Trilogy* offers a powerful portrayal of women whose lives are shaped by the external forces of colonialism, social stratification, and patriarchal norms. Through characters like Deeti, Paulette, and Shireenbai, Amitav Ghosh explores the complexities of female identity in a rapidly changing world. While these women are constrained by social structures, they also resist and challenge these limitations, asserting their agency and redefining their roles in society.

The novels underscore the importance of freedom and personal responsibility, themes that resonate in the context of colonial history and feminist discourse. Ghosh's female characters emerge not as passive victims but as active agents who carve out new identities in the face of overwhelming adversity. Ultimately, the *Ibis Trilogy* is a testament to the resilience of women, and their ability to transcend the rigid social norms that seek to define them.

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